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How has Radical Islam Become the Most Popular Form of Political Opposition in the Islamic World?

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Radical Islamic movements vary in scope and origin. They have responded to indigenous, cultural, social and economic forces that have silenced competing voices for change in many parts of the Middle East. They have typically espoused an anti-secular ideology to reverse the secular, or 'Western', development trends of the post-war period in much of the Islamic world. As the cultural and socioeconomic conditions that have fueled Islamic radicalism persist, the Arab World remains very susceptible to the kind of violent unrest inspired by the Al-Qaeda movement and characterized by the September 11th attacks on the United States. This paper shall analyze the reasons and mechanisms that have contributed to the radicalization of Islam, turning it into the most important vehicle for political opposition in the Islamic world. It will show that the process of Islamic radicalization has resulted from indigenous cultural and socioeconomic conditions, in places such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In addition, the paper shall analyze important manifestations of the radical Islamic phenomenon through the Islamic revolution in Iran, economic re-structuring difficulties in Algeria and the ideological renewal of Islam.

The Potential of Radical Islam in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the monarchy has ruled in cooperation with the conservative Wahhabi establishment. It has also witnessed a considerable degree of Islamist unrest. The House of Saud's legitimacy has rested on its ability to foster economic development while serving religious interests and organizations. However, the rapid pace of industrial and economic development in recent decades has disrupted traditional social structures. As a result, the Kingdom has experienced turbulence stemming from the competing influences of the modernizing West and revolutionary Islamic Iran.

In the late 1970s a variety of opposition groups emerged in Saudi Arabia, including a Communist party. The Islamic revolution in Iran, however, inspired common Saudis, as well as army officers and members of the royal family, to channel their political grievances through a purer form of Islam.

Preceding Osama bin Laden's very same message by more than a decade, the leaders of the revolt urged Saudis to overthrow King Khaled, and called for the expulsion of all foreigners from the Kingdom. The event culminated on November 20th, 1979 when the spiritual leader of the revolt, Juhaiman al-Ataiba, officially proclaimed a rebellion in the name of a purified Islam. Juhaiman condemned the royal family's corruption and demanded a return to the values of the first centuries of Islam. The revolt ended with a storming of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the deaths of 63 rebels. These events of 20 years ago provide an indication of the possible reaction of ordinary Saudis to the current crisis, and to the emergence of Osama bin Laden as a leader whose message has resonated among many Arabs and Muslims.

There is an inherent connection between bin Laden's Al-Qaeda and the Saudi Government. Bin Laden had official ties to the Saudi royal family through Prince Turki bin Faisal, the head of Saudi Intelligence. The latter provided funds to fuel the *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan, as well as the religious schools along the Pakistani-Afghan border that promoted the Wahhabi Islam of the Saudis, which ultimately spawned the Taliban. More importantly, the active involvement of the Saudis in Afghanistan diffused domestic tensions within the Kingdom during 1979. It served as an outlet for the fervour of their own dissidents, who would go and join the multinational Islamic force known as the Arab-Afghans. The repercussions of the return of war-weary Arab-Afghans to their countries – Osama bin Laden among them – during the 1990s de-

stabilized the internal politics of these countries, and has accounted for much of the recent political violence in the Arab world. The existence of elements friendly to bin Laden within the Saudi royal family and the intelligence services remains a likely possibility, and illustrates the extent of the problem. The appeal of radical Islamic alternatives has become more intense during the 1990s as frequent downturns in the Saudi economy produced widespread unemployment amongst the university-educated youth. Notably, 150,000 unemployed graduates of religious colleges have demanded the same social justice, wealth re-distribution and government services reform granted to their peers throughout the Islamic world. The Gulf War also fueled the rise of Islamist opposition groups, as many Saudis – again, Osama bin Laden among them – opposed the presence of foreign troops and women soldiers on Saudi soil. Certainly the eventual succession of the aging and ill King Fahd will be of great significance, since it will amplify many of the above factors and likely increase the potential for Islamic radicalism in Saudi Arabia – one of the most strategically important countries in the world.

Islamic Radicalism in Egypt

The influence of the Arab-Afghans, and their fomenting of radical Islam, has also been felt in Egypt during the 1990s. Several bombing attacks on civilians and tourists, as well as the various attempts on President Hosni Mubarak's life, have been traced to groups associated with the Soviet-Afghan conflict. In view of the close ties between many Egyptian Islamic groups and the Arab-Afghans, and as recent events have shown tensions between the Government of Egypt (GOE) and Islamist organizations are likely to escalate. The Arab-Afghans have exploited Egypt's deteriorating economic conditions as a pretext for their actions. However, Egyptian Islamist organizations have adopted a variety of approaches that are, more often than not, peaceful and characteristic of a genuine civil society. Indeed, organizations such as the Islamic Brotherhood have recently shown that some compromise is possible with the current regime, as well as with rival factions, by participating in national elections, thereby minimizing the possibility of a civil war. The Brotherhood now opposes government policy not with violence, but rather from a legal and regulated official position. Sadly, it is facing mounting pressure from more radical Islamist groups to revert to the old ways.

Nonetheless, intractable socioeconomic problems have made it more difficult to contain unrest. The continuing reduction of the public sector since the late 1970s and the failure to stimulate private economic enterprise will make it even harder for Egypt to ameliorate the poor economic conditions that stimulate Islamist unrest. Moreover, Egypt may expect to suffer a strong decline in the very important tourist industry as the US-led war in Afghanistan, and possibly elsewhere in the Middle East, continues. Although the Egypt achieved significant development in the 1950s and 1960s, it has pursued misguided economic policies that have fallen short of their objectives. The benefits of the oil boom after 1973 and the Sadat-Mubarak economic liberalization policies that followed were mismanaged. Economic liberalization was primarily directed at the speculative construction and real estate sectors, each of which failed to attract foreign investment. Unemployment persisted as the state reduced spending to comply with IMF directives on debt re-structuring. By 1986 these brought about a gradual erosion of the human development achievements of the 1950s and 1970s. In addition, the series of economic reforms appeared to only benefit the already wealthy.

Islamist organizations have also gained popularity by filling the void left by the declining State. Support and membership for such organizations has cut across class and income barriers and is indicative of the frustration of a large portion of society – particularly youth – with the current political establishment in Egypt. The Government has not offered viable solutions to problems of unemployment, housing shortages, deteriorating municipal services, the poor quality of health care, and education. Islamist organizations have solved problems that the Government has been unable or unwilling to confront. Unlike state-owned and private banks, the Islamic Brotherhood has operated Islamic Investment Companies (IIC) since the mid-1970s that have provided a real positive rate of interest. The Brotherhood, which for decades was targeted by Egyptian authorities due to suspected terrorist activities, has spread its influence among the general population, and has retained the services of physicians, pharmacists, engineers, accountants and other professionals. They volunteer through independent organizations affiliated with a local mosque, ensuring that the delivery of their service is linked to a politico/religious message that further enhances support for Islamic organizations. Less socially-conscious Islamist organizations have adopted violence directed toward symbols of the Government and its perceived foreign backers, including tourists.

Ultimately, in view of chronic economic difficulties and the GOE's inability to tackle the problems of poverty and unemployment makes Egypt very vulnerable to the zeal and violence of militant Islam. What makes this important is that Egypt is considered a valuable Western ally in the region and a moderate Arab state that has a stabilizing effect in the area, especially with regard to Arab-Israeli relations.

Iran: The Failure of Modernization

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 remains until now the most successful manifestation of political Islam. It inspired several Islamist movements, including those found in the two case studies above. An 'anatomy' of the Revolution shows how political Islam has emerged from the interplay of indigenous social, economic and cultural factors.

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The conditions for social unrest in Iran ripened as the Shah's oil-financed industrializing drive of the 1970s neglected rural development and accelerated the migration of laborers from rural areas to the cities. These migrants were needed to fill the manpower demands of a booming construction industry. However, by 1976, high inflation resulted in a recession, and many rural migrants became unemployed and fell into poverty. The religious class, the *Ulema*, and traditional merchant establishment, the *Bazaar*, which represented a significant sociopolitical force, responded to the plight of the migrants - or exploited their hardship – to earn the allegiance of this politically estranged and angry portion of the population. The Iranian Communist Party, known as the *Tudeh*, had also tried to politicize the rural migrants but had failed. Rather than adopting the complicated class analysis rationalizations of the *Tudeh*, the *Ulema* spoke the language of the migrants and knew how to reach them through religious and folkloristic gatherings that were especially popular in the rural areas.

The uncontrolled flood of rural migration continued and created vast slum areas with the associated social problems of prostitution, alcoholism, drug addiction and crime. The *Ulema* attributed the urban decay to the Shah's western inclinations and offered tradition and the restoration of religious law, known as *Shari'a*, as the way to re-establish order and equality. Accordingly, the *Ulema* and the *Bazaar* alliance gained exclusive influence over the most destitute element of society at the dawn of the Revolution and co-opted their support against secular policies.

The *Ulema's* influence grew further, as the Shah established a compulsory literacy program in order to advance education by sending army conscripts into rural areas as teachers. The *Ulema* perceived the literacy program as a challenge to their traditional role in providing education, and reacted with predictable anger. One cleric, the Ayatollah Khomeini, denounced the regime and was exiled. Railing at the Shah from abroad, he became the most prominent symbol of resistance to the government. By 1979, inspired by Khomeini, a resurgent Islamic movement displaced other opposition groups (including the Communist party) to emerge as the most effective means of opposing the Shah. Accordingly, the Revolution against the Shah adopted an Islamic character and left the religious establishment as the principal power-broker when the Shah abdicated in March of 1979.

Nonetheless, to be politically effective, Islam had to undergo an ideological transformation that would enable it to exert political and socioeconomic authority. To do so, Ayatollah Khomeini constitutionally ensured that all executive, judicial and legislative authority conformed to the Islamic guidelines set out in the *Koran* and the collected body of early Islamic scholarship known as the *Sunnah*. This enabled the revolutionary government to 'islamize' society by enforcing an economy, social morality, institutionalized dress codes and mores that conformed as closely as possible to the ordinances of the *Koran*.

Thus, the appeal of political Islam, in Iran, resulted from its emergence as the only viable alternative to the (secular) State in the context of an ineffective secular opposition. The Iranian Islamic Republic's survival, perseverance and continued adherence to a strict political and ideological interpretation of Islamist government, continues to be a rallying point for political opposition for many in the Muslim world.

Algeria: Failed Reform and Delegitimization of the Secular State

A failed modernizing effort in Algeria also fueled the politicization of Islam. The Islamic political alternative surfaced in the early 1980s in response to growing economic malaise that resulting from IMF-inspired structural adjustments that reduced the State's capacity to absorb labour into industry and the bureaucracy. The already unsustainable problem of rural-urban migrants worsened in the wake of the reforms. President Boumedienne promoted a state-run economy based on industry and financed by sales of crude oil. This offered very limited possibilities for significant private enterprise. Efforts to secularize society and the economy could be tolerated by the population so long as the State was able to continue to provide jobs and decent wages for its growing population. However, as in Egypt, economic restructuring efforts in the 1980s under President Benjedid exposed the shortcomings of his predecessor's policies of unregulated and wasteful growth. The State was forced to drastically reduce its presence in the economy, leaving thousands unemployed and essential services, from legal to medical, in turmoil. Islamic organizations, such as the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) filled in for the State and civil society by supplying essential welfare, medical and even judicial services. The latter was provided through popular courts that upheld *Shari'a* to deal with cases in a speedier and more effective manner. The decline in State power caused several leading technocrats in the Benjedid Government to convert to the Islamist cause, further eroding the legitimacy of the State. One such leader, Abdelhamid Brahimi, expected the Islamic alternative to divert Algeria culturally and economically more towards the Arab-Islamic sphere of influence, stressing that the orientation to the 'West' had only produced increased dependency and unfair terms of trade.

As the State's secular program failed, opposition to secularism, combined with the increased adoption of Islamic values, became equated with opposition to the State. Fittingly, the economic reforms culminated in 1989, just as many veterans were returning from the war in Afghanistan. The explosive combination of widespread economic and cultural disenchantment, along with the sudden influx of unemployed Islamic warriors, inevitably produced a dangerous climate. Indeed, Algeria has wit-

nessed the most violent repercussions of the return of Arab-Afghans to their home countries. The GIA (Armed Islamic Group) took over the more moderate FIS party by 1995 and was involved in the more serious acts of violence. These rose to a fever pitch after the 1991 elections – the results of which were thrown out by the Government who did not want to turn the reigns of power over to the radical Islamist party that had won the election. The Connections to the North African community in France have enabled the GIA to spread its influence (and violence) to the West and elsewhere in North Africa.

What Does Political Islam Offer and Why Is it Opposed to the 'Western' Model of Development?

As the case studies show, Islamists have transformed their religion into a powerful political force. Unlike secular political programs, the Islamic political agenda has largely neglected economics. Islamic politics are essentially about culture and speak of dress codes, sexual mores, the family, and the enforcement of social conformity to the tenets of piety. Principally, Islamists have argued that the *Shari'a* offers a method of governance that is in accordance with principles set out by God. However, they have not provided an analysis of the current state of affairs or a solution to the very real economic and social problems that the Islamic world is actually facing. The *Shari'a* has mostly been upheld as a symbol of pride and identity. For many Muslims, these had been lost when emerging Islamic states applied institutional and constitutional reforms in the 19th and 20th centuries to emulate the Western model precisely by refuting the *Shari'a*.

The introduction of Western legal systems has been considered a major aspect of 'cultural imperialism', while the current revival of the Islamic heritage is viewed as an act of cultural affirmation. Conscious of the mobilizing power of Islamic symbols, even moderate, secular ideologies harnessed the political power of Islam. In post-war Egypt, President Gamal Abdel Nasser promoted the idea of *jihad* as an ideological concept to mobilize the people against internal or external enemies, while the struggle against Western imperialism was veiled in religious terms. Under President Anwar Sadat, religious symbolism was renewed to portray the new president's distance from socialism, and the *Shari'a* was officially, if not practically, declared to be the principal source of legislation. In many Arab nations, attention to the economic hardships of the 1970s was diverted by the State's promotion of Islamic guidance as the means to revive moral character. Whereas the Industrial Revolution in Europe was an indigenous response to the inherent European phenomena of the Renaissance, religious reform and the Enlightenment, Islamic nations borrowed or imitated these developments without an appropriate cultural frame of reference. This has meant that a cultural vacuum was left within Middle Eastern political discourse that has recently been filled by radical Islam.

Conclusions: The Emergence of a Pattern

Throughout the Middle East, a pattern has emerged in the ideological nature and aspirations of the Islamic movements, and in the social, political and economic conditions that have stimulated their formation. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 has promoted a politically invigorated Islam as the most effective vehicle for social and political change in the Middle East, inspiring Islamist political movements in many Muslim countries. Prominent religious figures have articulated a reformist and revolutionary brand of Islam that has transformed it from a religious denomination to a political force. Suited to the conditions in individual states, and exploiting the disillusionment with secularism, political Islam has crystallized as the most significant opposition among the religiously-conscious intelligentsia and lower classes in the Middle East. In short, the Islamic revival represents the search for a formula for political organization that is indigenous and culturally relevant to the peoples of the region.

The September 11 terrorist attacks have not only embroiled the United States in a new war in the Middle East but have seemingly elevated the popularity of Islamic radicalism as an agent of change in the Islamic world in a way not seen since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The figure of Khomeini has been conveniently replaced by Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network. A tragic consequence of the popularity of Islamic radicalism is that governments throughout the Middle East use this phenomenon to resist calls to extend more political and social freedoms to their people, while justifying the use of repressive police and security forces. Nonetheless, given the revived cultural relevance and the socioeconomic links that have enabled the formation of grass-roots Islamic movements, it is inevitable that Islamic politics will be an important component of any democratizing effort in the Islamic world.

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